

EMPOWERING RESPONSIBLE TOURISTS THROUGH A SMART AND CROWD-SOURCED PLATFORM – THE CASE OF TRIPDOODLER

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Abstract:

TripDoodler is a green-tech platform that empowers responsible travelers to find, validate, and share verified travel options that are more sustainable. It operates on a crowd-sourced certification model, where travelers can easily acknowledge the sustainability practices of the travel businesses they visit based on simple objective parameters. These user-generated ratings become crucial action points for businesses, which get first-hand insights into how their customers perceive their sustainability efforts. TripDoodler's primary audience group is Generation Z, targeted through influencer marketing campaigns. The main objective of this case study is to contextualize the role of smart and crowd-sourced platforms in empowering responsible tourists through the case of TripDoodler.

Resumo:

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of Responsible Tourism can be traced back to the 1980s when Krippendorf (1987) recognized the need for the tourism industry to become more environmentally oriented and socially responsible. With consistent progressions in the domain, researchers have expressed the need for tourism stakeholders to step-up to reduce the negative and enhance the positive economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts of tourism, the three key pillars of sustainable tourism development (Mihalic, 2016). One of the essential stakeholders in the tourism industry is the tourists; Weeden (2011: 230) comprehensively defines a responsible tourist as the one “...who is likely to show respect for local people and their customs, to take personal responsibility for the impact of their holiday, to want to share the economic benefits of their holidays with local communities, and to share their knowledge about the world with their families.” Nonetheless, it is essential to highlight the traditionally complex, somewhat overlooked relationship between responsible behavior and tourists. It is also important to consider that according to Swarbrooke (1999: 11), in his book *Sustainable Tourism Management*, “tourists who may take sustainable development seriously in their everyday lives, believe that their annual vacation is the only time when they can behave hedonistically, without the need to be responsible.”

The individual, regional, and global forces and influences (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019) have made the modern-day, technologically-savvy traveler more aware of the necessity to inculcate responsible behavior while traveling (Cavagnaro, Staffieri & Postma, 2018). However, a typical observation in some of the studies around responsible tourists has found that positive attitudes toward responsible tourism are not always accompanied by consistent, responsible behaviors and decisions (Antimova, Najwin & Peeters, 2012; Cohen, Prayag & Moital, 2014; Hibbert, Dickinson, Gössling & Curtin, 2013). Although tourists “generally care about the environment and do not wish to harm it, the very fact that they go on vacation often has negative environmental consequences” (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). This is related to the attitude-behavior gap in the context of sustainable and responsible tourism. This intention-behavior gap has been vividly investigated in some recent studies, including Sadiq, Adil and Paul (2022) regarding eco-friendly hotel stays; Martins, Pereira, Rosado, Marôco, McCullough and Mascarenhas (2022) on the use of public transportation; Mkono and Hughes (2020) on eco-guilt and shame in the context of tourism; Tölkes (2020) on sustainability communication to address this gap.

On similar grounds, some key tourism industry players have also witnessed the prevalence of the attitude-behavior gap in the market. A sustainable travel study by the Expedia Group (2022: 6,25) found that “90% of consumers look for sustainable options when traveling”; however, “7 in 10 consumers feel overwhelmed by starting the process of being a more sustainable traveler.” This fact was further reinforced by a sustainable travel report by Booking.com (2022:

Cases

5), which revealed that “while the research indicates that awareness of sustainable stays is clearly growing, there is still work to be done to make more sustainable stay options easier for everyone to find.”

From the above-stated discussions, it is conspicuous that there exists a need for the tourism industry to make sustainability-concerned information more transparent and understandable for a broad audience of travelers, which encourages them to perform responsible behavior during all three stages of travel.

2. CASE DEVELOPMENT

What is TripDoodler?

Based in Denmark, TripDoodler is a green-tech platform that empowers responsible travelers to find, validate (also known as rate; implying an assessment of the sustainability efforts of travel businesses), and share verified travel options that are more sustainable. Powered by its proprietary sustainability user-rating system, travelers can acknowledge the sustainability initiatives of places they visit through easily visible objective parameters. TripDoodler provides a transparent framework and integrates all crowd-sourced ratings into an ethical algorithm. As a result, it makes it easy for travelers to leave their best impressions at places they visit while building the world's first and largest database of sustainable travel choices, led by responsible travelers. The organization is driven by Sustainable Development Goals (2030), especially SDG 8.9 (Promote Beneficial and Sustainable Tourism) and SDG 4.7 (Education for sustainable development and global citizenship). Incepted in 2019 as a community-based travel planning tool, TripDoodler ApS is directed by Josephine Piplits (Founder and CEO), a tourism professional who vests 25+ years of global and nordic top management travel industry experience with companies like CWT and Hogg Robinson. She also holds a GSTC Professional Certificate in Sustainable Tourism.

How is the crowd contributing to sustainability?

Sustainability is typically evaluated by accredited third-party certifications and experts in the domain and is deemed too complicated for the general masses to comprehend. Travelers, while visiting an establishment, can utilize the set of objective parameters to acknowledge the sustainability practices they can see around, thus, balancing integrity with ease of use. In doing so, they, without the need to be an expert, leave better marks for like-minded enthusiasts to follow. Additionally, they create informative data points for the travel establishment to apprehend how the customers perceive their sustainability efforts and what they typically look for. Plus, the establishments also get inspired by what other businesses in their arena are doing regarding sustainability.

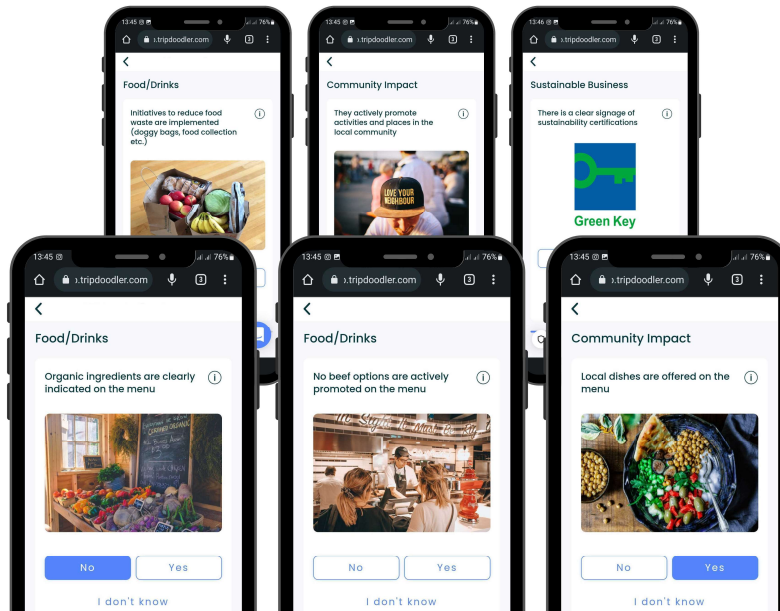
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The sustainability parameters

At TripDoodler, sustainable travel and tourism go beyond the apparent climate impact. The three pillars of Environment, Socio-Culture, and Economy, defined by the UNWTO for sustainable tourism, are considered equally important. TripDoodler has scrutinized an original shortlist of 40+ parameters on four dimensions: 1. impact, 2. visibility, 3. interest, and 4. baseline. After weighing all the parameters across the four extents, the ones with the best scores are considered the core parameters, ranging between 5-7 in the count. To quote an example, the current set of core parameters for a ‘place to eat’ establishment is:

1. Organic ingredients are clearly indicated on the menu
2. No beef options are actively promoted on the menu
3. Initiatives to reduce food waste are implemented (doggy bags, food collection, etc.)
4. Local dishes are offered on the menu
5. They actively promote activities and places in the local community
6. There is clear signage of sustainability certifications

Figure 1. Screens from the TripDoodler App – Core Parameters (Places to eat)



Source: [<https://app.tripdoodler.com/>], as available at 22/11/2022.

These limited core parameters make it easy for travelers to recognize the sustainability efforts of travel businesses. Travelers wishing to acknowledge the

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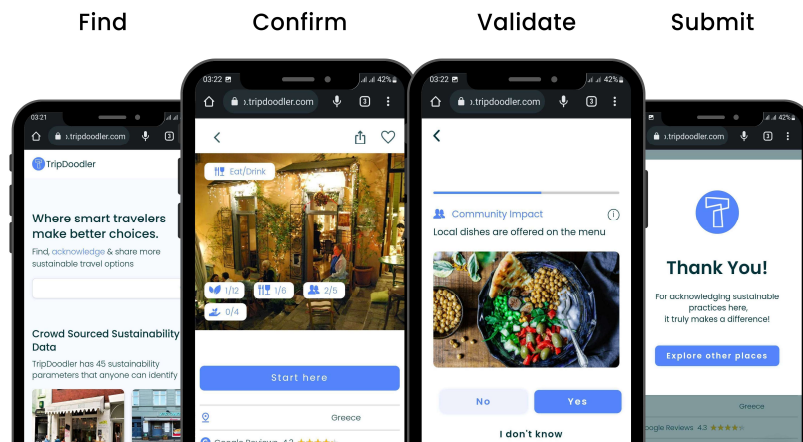
sustainability practices beyond the core list are then presented with additional parameters.

The user journey on the platform

TripDoodler facilitates travelers in all three stages of travel; the prospective phase (find), the active phase (rate), and the reflective phase (share).

1. In the pre-travel phase, travelers can look for and understand the sustainability practices of places they wish to visit based on 40+ unique sustainability parameters validated by other travelers. If the business is yet to be acknowledged for its sustainability efforts, travelers can seize the opportunity to be the first to rate the place and help other travelers find it on TripDoodler's searchable database of better travel choices.
2. During the on-site travel phase, responsible travelers can validate all the sustainable practices they identify at the places they visit, including accommodations, places to eat and drink, and shops. Travelers using the TripDoodler App can search for the place by typing in the name and choosing it in the drop-down menu. After confirming the travel business, travelers have to look for the objective sustainable practices and mark them with a “yes,” “no,” or “I do not know” answer. By way of an example, if a traveler identifies that local dishes are offered on the menu by a restaurant, then the traveler will mark a “yes” on the platform. Once the series of 5-7 core parameters are validated, travelers can either acknowledge more sustainability practices or simply submit their ratings.
3. The post-travel phase proposes an opportunity for travelers to share their rating experiences in the TripDoodler digital communities and inspire other travelers to find such places that care.

Figure 2. Screens from the TripDoodler App – The User Journey



Source: [<https://app.tripdoodler.com/>], as available at 16/11/2022.

The Go-to-Market strategy

TripDoodler seeks to jump-start with Generation Z as its primary target group while positioning the platform. Gen-Z, or the internet generation, is driving sustainable changes, with 2 out of 3 actively looking to travel more responsibly, as per the Expedia Outlook Report, 2021. Further, a Forbes article in 2020 revealed that more than half of the Gen-Zs trust social media influencers for brand or product advice. TripDoodler aims to reach these travelers through a robust user-rating acquisition model by activating its network of sustainable travel influencers and bloggers with a global reach of three million followers. Furthermore, the organization aspires to engage the committed audience through closed digital communities with content that educates, inspires, and drives followers to rate on the platform. A fine example of such closed communities is 'By Traveler, For Traveler' - a Facebook group administered by TripDoodler with 500+ sustainable travel enthusiasts.

4. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Question 1. *Does the smart tourism ecosystem principally factor in the concept of sustainability?*

The analysis of the case allows answering this question positively. In addition to establishing intelligent and meaningful tourism relationships (Molz, 2012), increasing the efficiency of resource management (Femenia-Serra & Neuhofer, 2018), and enhancing destination competitiveness (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013), one of the major principles of smart tourism is to lead sustainable tourism development (Bastidas-Manzano, SánchezFernández & Casado-Aranda, 2021; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013; Fermenia-Serra, Perles-Ribes & Ivars-Baidal, 2019; Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang & Koo, 2015).

Despite being an essential actor in the smart tourism sphere, there have been limited studies on Smart Tourists as subjects, especially when understanding their responsible behaviors in sustainable tourism settings. Through this case study, TripDoodler proposes an opportunity to investigate further the responsible behavior of tech-savvy travelers.

Question 2. *How are users segmented on TripDoodler?*

Users of a product or service can be clustered through their common characteristics, like the usual demographic or behavioral traits they exhibit. From a marketing perspective, it is crucial to understand and group users to foster better communication and seamless product placement. Previous studies have segmented the heterogeneous group of tourists into meaningful clusters, such as Gajdosik (2019) on smart tourists, Cavagnaro, Staffieri and Postma (2018) on young tourists, Lascu, Manrai, Manrai and Gan (2018) on nature tourists; and Mehmetoglu (2010) on sustainable tourists.

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At TripDoodler, the early market users are typically segmented based on their behavioral characteristics. At present, one is a group of responsible travelers with high awareness and education about sustainability. The other group comprises tech-savvy travelers curious to learn and experience sustainability firsthand. The classification criteria are expected to evolve as TripDoodler further understands user behavior and personas.

Question 3. *Are there precedents from the recent literature validating the emerging role of social media influencers impacting responsible tourist behavior?*

Indeed, the concept of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) is a novel marketing technique for user acquisition. Though digital influencer marketing is rapidly proliferating in the travel industry, especially where Generation Z is the targetted market, some recent literature supports the notion of social media influencers impacting responsible tourist intentions and behavior.

Palazzo, Vollero, Vitale and Siano (2021) have investigated the role of different types of SMIs on Instagram in shaping the sustainable behaviors of tourists. A contemporary study by Asan (2022) measured the impact of SMIs on bicycle travelers using a mixed methodology approach. Furthermore, Kapoor, Balaji, Jiang and Jebarajakirthy (2022) examined the effectiveness of SMIs on travelers' perceptions of sustainability and intentions to perform sustainable behavior using a controlled experimental study design.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Responsible travel is often considered a challenging, tedious task by many – typically because the information to consciously select sustainable travel options is, to a lot extent, unevenly distributed in the market. In addition, the lack of transparency and authenticity in the information dissemination process makes it exhausting for travelers to perform responsible travel behavior, despite their positive attitudes toward it. Smart, crowd-sourced platforms like TripDoodler add voice to the travelers' first-hand impressions of sustainability, making it easy, fun, engaging, transparent, and trustworthy to make sustainable travel choices at places they visit.

Investing resources in strategic partnerships, ranging widely from Destination Management Organizations to Non-Profit Organizations in a region, will be the key for crowd-sourced platforms like TripDoodler to scale in terms of geography, revenue, and user acquisition. From a marketing perspective, the right balance of promotional activities conducted through analogue and digital channels can assist TripDoodler in unlocking a series of new, relevant audience bases. Non-profit marketing approaches encouraging travelers to adopt a more responsible consumption at destinations (e.g. social marketing) are key to achieving better

tourism, i.e., more sustainable Tourism (Hall, 2014; Sha & George, 2020). A conscious traveler-centric approach will positively assist TripDoodler in creating the world's largest database of better travel choices led by travelers, for travelers.

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